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Dianne Wampler 04/18/2007 05:18:29 PM From DB/Inbox: Dianne Wampler

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SUBJECT: Drowning in Tea Leaves - Turkish Press Coverage of the
Presidential Elections

REF: Ankara 898

11. Summary: As the Turkish Presidential election begins officially, the media's coverage leading up to the election has been obsessed with "will he or won't he," playing a guessing game rather than conducting any serious analysis of what it would mean for the country, should PM Erdogan become president. The Prime Minister has until now, by most critics' accounts, played a cagey game, refusing to give any clear indication as to whether or not he will run. This, along with an anemic opposition, Turkey's unique brand of democratic politics, and the media's reluctance to play a role in civil society, has left the media drowning in their own tea leaves. End Summary.

Frenzied Oracles

12. Press speculation on whether or not Prime Minister Erdogan could become president started in a significant way last fall and has continued throughout the last several months, building in intensity. From the beginning, both beat reporters and columnists have asked one primary question: "Will he or won't he?" Every utterance from an AKP member, in particular from the Prime Minister, is fodder for a new front page story. On the eve of the elections, for instance, the PM remarked to journalists, "It doesn't matter whether I'm Prime Minister or President, like everyone, I will end up in a grave someday." This, along with other equally opaque comments, was sufficient to cause journalists to speculate that he will run for President.

13. In contrast, a PM comment six weeks ago that "our lives are full of surprises, there might be a surprise" caused reporters to speculate that the PM would not run for office. Commentators, too, fill countless column inches looking for signs in every off-the-cuff remark. Some, tiring of the normal speculation, use their columns to analyze their colleagues' obsession with the speculation.

Turkish Daily News columnist Yusuf Kanli said in a recent piece that only four people know - the PM and his wife and FM Gul and his wife - and they're laughing to themselves. Meanwhile, Zaman columnist Mustafa Unal recently praised the PM for not revealing his intentions. Unal rightly points out that previous presidents Ozal, Demirel and Sezer also were announced last minute. By withholding a public announcement, Unal argues, the PM has avoided a damaging campaign.

Where's the analysis?

14. The reasons why the media are stuck in the speculative sphere include concrete factors such as an anemic opposition that seems unable or unwilling to put forth serious policy alternatives. While AKP members are content to throw out ambiguous comments, the opposition spits venomous warnings about headscarved women in Cankaya (anathema to Turkey's "secular" elite) and raises red herring arguments such as the possibility that the PM's past criminal conviction (on a freedom of speech charge) could prevent him from becoming president. This leaves the press with little of substance to report on. Even if a journalist might be inspired to think beyond the "will he or won't he" question, many journalists don't see any constructive reason to do so. As mainstream daily Hurriyet Bureau Chief Enis Berberoglu says, "Why write something positive about Erdogan that could be used as propaganda in his campaign?"

15. The fact that the president is chosen by the parliament - which is firmly controlled by the AKP - also means journalists and even normal citizens do not play an active role in the process. Journalists, according to MFA Spokesman Levent Bilman, probably believe it is a "done deal" so don't see the need to expend any serious energy on it. Others cite the media itself as the major factor. Leyla Tasvanoglu of nationalist daily Cumhuriyet says, "Few journalists are serious, they go their own ways." Business daily Dunya columnist Mithat Melen adds, "Editors don't want to upset the government, so journalists don't write anything serious," a reminder of the convoluted and murky relationships between the government and media that play heavily in how news gets reported (reftel).

Islamists vs. Secularists

16. When reporters have moved past the simple will-won't question, their reporting has split predictably down secularist-Islamist lines. Columnists for Islamic oriented dailies Zaman and Yeni Safak have written with increasing stridency that the debate about the presidency is really about elite secularists wanting to exclude the country's majority from governing. Zaman columnist Etyen Mahcupyan's view that "the bureaucratic elite feel democracy is a regime that reflects their own preferences, not the public's" is a typical example.

17. Secularist press reports, both straight reporting and opinion pieces, range from mild references to the specter of secret Islamist agendas to Cumhuriyet's highly dramatic paid advertising campaign in which a black and white picture of a clock appears above the words, "the clock is about to turn back 100 years." Add to this the constant speculation of the military's intentions as well as a persistent conspiracy theory that the US is really backing an AKP candidate, and you have a rich and spicy stew, but without much meat.

18. Comment: Until a presidential candidate is announced, the current tenor of coverage - speculative and biased - will likely continue and even intensify. Once a candidate is announced, some substance may appear but serious analysis is unlikely, given the unique, long existing structure of both the political and media systems. End comment.

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